

# The biter bit? Sejanus and Tiberius in Tacitus' *Annals*

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On 18 October A.D. 31, the praetorian prefect Sejanus was arrested and condemned to death amid suspicions of a conspiracy against the Emperor Tiberius. That evening, his body was unceremoniously thrown down a flight of steps known as the Gemonian Stairs, where the crowd tore it to pieces, before going on a killing spree of anyone they could find who was connected to Sejanus. Before then, he had been one of the most powerful and feared men in Rome. How and why had he been able to amass so much influence? As Rhiannon Ash explains, later Roman writers grappled with this question long after the man himself had died.

*Now the flames hiss, now by means of bellows and furnace the revered head blazes and mighty Sejanus crackles. Next, from the face which was number two in the whole world, come pitchers, basins, saucepans, and piss-pots... But what about Remus' mob? It follows Fortune, as always, and loathes condemned men. That same public (if Nortia had favoured her Etruscan, if the elderly emperor had been destroyed) at this very moment would be hailing Sejanus as Augustus. (Juvenal, Satire 10.61–4, 72–7)*

## Tumbling statues

Juvenal's depiction of the moment Sejanus' statues were shattered by the mob after his brutal death graphically illustrates the potential dangers of courting power. For Juvenal, writing *Satire* 10 probably during Hadrian's principate (A.D. 117–38) and after Tacitus published the *Annals*, Sejanus' sudden reversal of fortune (his *peripeteia*) exemplifies the corrosive envy directed at powerful men. At the same time, it demonstrates the fickleness of the Roman people, who would have been quite happy to call Sejanus emperor if Tiberius had been eliminated.

For the symbolic act of toppling statues, we can compare Juvenal's snapshot with

later images including US marines bringing down Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square in Baghdad (April 2003). They were broadcast live and quite possibly staged, but these scenes were certainly designed to communicate the end of Hussein's influence. Juvenal himself was perhaps inspired by a similar incident which took place long after Sejanus' death, namely the accounts of the emperor Domitian's statues being smashed after his assassination in A.D. 96 – recorded for us by both Pliny and Suetonius.

## A battle of wits

In Juvenal's eyes, Sejanus was pitting his wits directly against the elderly Tiberius, and the prize for victory was the principate: the chance to be the emperor of Rome. Although in practice it seems unlikely that Sejanus, an equestrian from Vulsinii (now Bolsena in central Italy), was plotting to seize power for himself, his efforts to manipulate Tiberius are central to the Roman historian Tacitus' narrative over *Annals* 4 and 5.

The ups and downs of this relationship between the emperor and his right-hand man are recreated in dramatic fashion by Tacitus. At times, it feels as if we are virtually watching a historical play unfolding before our eyes, as Tacitus uses his powers of creative imagination to draw us in to the secret world of the imperial household. When reading his account, it is important to remember that ancient historians may sometimes have drawn on other fictionalized genres such as tragedy and epic on points of detail, particularly for events

which predated an author's own era. Yet ancient historians always aimed to illuminate and explain historical phenomena. And Tiberius' relationship with Sejanus is certainly a phenomenon in need of explanation for a Roman audience. Above all, Tacitus wants his readers to understand how and why a figure such as Sejanus proved so necessary for Tiberius to function as emperor.

Early on, Sejanus looks in control, as straightaway Tacitus hints that Tiberius is wrapped around Sejanus' little finger:

*'[Sejanus] shackled [deuinxit] Tiberius to such an extent that the latter, dark as he was towards others, was rendered uniquely unguarded and unprotected in respect of Sejanus himself – this not so much by artfulness (indeed it was the same means by which he was vanquished) as by the anger of the gods against the Roman cause, for whose extermination he alike thrived and fell [uiguit ceciditque]' Annals 4.1.2 (all translations by A. J. Woodman).*

In this intriguing passage, Tiberius' vulnerability is encapsulated through the compound verb *deuincio* ('shackle'). The metaphor of binding, with Sejanus as subject and Tiberius as object, is already powerfully expressive enough. Yet it gains punch when we compare how the empress Livia 'had shackled [*deuinxerat*] the old man Augustus' (*Annals* 1.3.4).

As often in Tacitus, however, an appended clause introduces crucial new details. Sejanus shackles Tiberius 'not so much by artfulness [*non tam sollertia*]', he writes. This is a surprising detail – surely artfulness will be essential for trapping the cunning Tiberius? Yet, the real bombshell comes in parentheses: '(indeed it was the same means by which he was vanquished)'.

Here Tacitus jumps to Sejanus' final defeat by Tiberius' superior cunning. Sejanus' downfall is highlighted even before Tacitus' character-sketch memorably exploits nuanced Latin to align Sejanus with a familiar villain from the dark days of the Roman republic, the conspirator Catiline (*Annals* 4.1.3, where Tacitus specifically evokes the portrait of

Catiline created by an earlier Roman historian, Sallust). Tacitus' focus on how Sejanus 'thrived and fell [*uiguit ceciditque*]' succinctly projects a sharp reversal of fortune recalling his first mention as 'a living demonstration of perils and prizes' (*Annals* 1.24.2). In doing so, Tacitus brilliantly accentuates the complexities of the evolving relationship between Tiberius and Sejanus even while anticipating its end.

### A poisonous presence

Early in the 'campaign', Sejanus certainly has some success, most notably in poisoning Tiberius' son Drusus:

*'Therefore Sejanus, deeming that haste was required, selected a poison which, by worming its way gradually, would resemble a chance disease. It was given to Drusus by the eunuch Lygdus, as became known eight years later.'* *Annals* 4.8.1

Sejanus has apparently hoodwinked Tiberius, at least temporarily. Yet even while narrating Sejanus' most deadly assault on the imperial household, Tacitus questions his power. Challenging a rumour that Tiberius had colluded with Sejanus to murder Drusus, Tacitus explains that it gained traction 'because Sejanus was considered [*habebatur*] the deviser of every act' (*Annals* 4.11.2). The use of *habebatur* thus subtly undermines our perception of Sejanus' dominance, suggesting that his reputation for devious criminality is more imposing than the reality.

### The empire strikes back

Where Sejanus' dominance over Tiberius really comes into question, however, is in the extraordinary exchange of letters in which Sejanus first requests marriage with Drusus' widow, Livilla, and then Tiberius refuses (*Annals* 4.39–41). Even before presenting the letters, Tacitus foregrounds the arrogance of Sejanus, 'insensible from his excessive good fortune' (4.39.1), which triggers the trope of excessive *hybris* (arrogance) preceding *peripeteia*, familiar to Tacitus' readers from the tragic stage. After murdering Drusus, Sejanus now feels confident (too confident) that Tiberius is his.

You might wonder why Sejanus and Tiberius communicate by letter. Why do they not just speak? After all, when the emperor Nero's minister Seneca the Younger requests retirement from public life at *Annals* 14.53–6, the two men simply talk. Moreover, Tacitus carefully underscores the written medium: 'It was then the custom to approach him, although present, in writing' (*Annals* 4.39.1). There

is something intriguing about stressing the habitual practice of written contact with Tiberius even in his presence. Perhaps Tacitus is just keen to stress that he is an industrious historian who has consulted all the appropriate documentary sources (even if some modern historians have expressed serious doubts about whether these letters ever even existed). Yet there are other compelling reasons why Tacitus accentuates this mode of communication: these reasons will become clearer as his narrative unfolds and reaches its dramatic finale.

### Prophecy of doom

In the same letter in which Tiberius rejects Sejanus' proposal of marriage to Livilla, the emperor writes at the end:

*'These matters, in virtue of our friendship, I have not concealed; but I shall not oppose either your designs or Livilla's. What I personally have been turning over in my mind, by what further relationship I am preparing to make you and me inseparable, I shall omit to mention at present; this only will I disclose, that there is nothing so lofty as not to be deserved by those virtues of yours and by your intentions towards me, and, given the right time, either in the senate or at a public meeting, I shall not keep silent'* (*Annals* 4.40.7).

In this beautifully deft finale, Tiberius' assertion that he will not oppose the marriage is obviously disingenuous after enumerating in such detail why it was unacceptable. And his tantalizing hints at some future elevation for Sejanus is brilliantly wrong-footing: the two indirect questions ('What I personally have been turning over in my mind, by what further relationship I am preparing to make you and me inseparable...') imply that Tiberius will reward Sejanus. Instead the main clause introduces bathos ('...I shall omit to mention at present'). Still, the prospect of something worthwhile is left dangling, perfectly crafted to entice Sejanus.

Tiberius saves the best until last: at the right time, he will not keep silent, either in the senate or at a public meeting. Tiberius thereby seems uncannily prophetic, hinting at future events. Fast forward from A.D. 25 to October A.D. 31, when Tiberius wrote to the senate from Capri denouncing Sejanus for plotting against Caligula, Germanicus' youngest son and the future emperor. According to the historian Cassius Dio (who was writing in the 3rd century A.D.), Macro – Sejanus' successor as praetorian prefect – read the letter to the senate. As he did, Sejanus was eagerly expecting fresh honours, but as the

lengthy letter unfolded, his fate became clear. He was quickly arrested, put on trial, and then executed. In Tacitus' telling of events in *Annals* 4, then, Tiberius' final words ('I shall not keep silent') – just at a point when Sejanus' hopes are highest – ironically foreshadow his dramatic reversal of fortune, which are again triggered by another letter.

### Sun, sea, and sand

Tiberius' departure from Rome for the island of Capri in A.D. 26 is a crucial turning-point in his principate; for Sejanus' influence reached unprecedented levels in the emperor's absence. Later writers subsequently saw Tiberius' retirement as a masterstroke on the part of his spurned deputy. Thus, immediately after Tiberius' devastating letter, Tacitus has Sejanus try to persuade Tiberius to live elsewhere:

*He foresaw many advantages: access would be in his own hands, and for the most part he would be the judge of correspondence, since it traveled by soldiers; soon Caesar, his old age already declining, would be softened by the seclusion of the place and would more easily hand over the responsibilities of command; and for himself there would be a lessening in resentment with the crowd of well-wishers withdrawn; and, with the inessential removed, his real powerfulness would increase* (*Annals* 4.41.2).

On the surface, Sejanus' efforts to remove Tiberius to Capri exemplify his malevolent influence on the *princeps*. Yet Tiberius had a track-record of withdrawing from Rome. During Augustus' principate, he had virtually put himself into exile by withdrawing to the island of Rhodes for a prolonged period (6 B.C.–A.D. 2). As early as A.D. 21, Tacitus introduces the topic of Tiberius' trip to the Italian region of Campania, adding that he was 'giving gradual consideration to a long and continuous absence' (*Annals* 3.31.2). If Sejanus wants to persuade Tiberius to leave Rome, then he is certainly 'working with' the emperor's pre-existing inclination, not manipulating him from scratch.

This marginalization of Sejanus' malicious influence is a possibility which Tacitus himself considers when Tiberius finally leaves Rome (A.D. 26):

*'As to the reason for his retirement, although I have followed the majority of authors and ascribed it to the practices of Sejanus, nevertheless, because he spent six continuous years in similar seclusion after bringing about the latter's slaughter, I am often moved to ask whether it is more realistically ascribed to the man himself, concealing his*

*savagery and lust by his location,  
though he exhibi-~~ted~~ them in deeds'*  
(Annals 4.57.1).

Looked at from this perspective, Sejanus certainly nudged Tiberius. Nonetheless, the emperor wanted to leave anyway.

### **And in the end?**

Tacitus knew that behind Sejanus' meteoric rise and fall lay a complex relationship between an emperor and his ambitious right-hand man which developed over more than a decade. Although Sejanus sometimes appeared dominant and Tiberius did not get everything his own way, nevertheless the shrewd emperor was always vigilant.

Tiberius had long been predisposed to withdraw from the limelight. Despite onlookers' assumptions that Sejanus controlled the emperor, it suited Tiberius to have a competent man of equestrian status dealing with tedious day-to-day matters – provided that Sejanus did not get too ambitious. When the possibility of an imperial marriage arose, Tiberius intervened decisively.

And when Sejanus pursued his alternative strategy of getting Tiberius to leave Rome, Tiberius happily played along because it suited him – as Tacitus suggests (4.57), Tiberius' continued sojourn on Capri even after Sejanus' downfall implies that the praetorian prefect's manipulation was the excuse, not the true cause of his withdrawal. A careful reading of Tacitus' account therefore suggests that for the most part, Tiberius knew what he was doing by relying on Sejanus. And when the time arrived, the statues quickly came tumbling down.

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